

Cal Shakes' 'Pygmalion' a Summertime Pleasure

By Lou Fancher



Irene Lucio as Eliza Doolittle and Anthony Fusco as Professor Henry Higgins.

There are five – if not more – very good reasons to see California Shakespeare Theater's uproarious, upstart rendition of George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion."

Number one, the story of a

screeching, yowling, Cockney flower seller named Eliza Doolittle is familiar. Adopted as a linguistic project and transformed through perfected parlance into a lady by two gentlemen bettors, phonetics professor Henry

Higgins and his buddy, Colonel Pickering, fans of Greek mythology will recognize the "sculptor falls in love with sculpture, which then comes to life" roots for the 1912 play. Musical theater and film aficionados know the story as "My Fair Lady."

A second argument for spending just over two hours at Orinda Bruns Amphitheater sometime before Aug. 24 – the production's last performance day – stands in opposition to the first: Artistic Director Jon Moscone's decidedly feminist take on class, gender and matters of choice. Some will be surprised by cords that run start-to-finish throughout the production and counter – even disrupt – the musical's and film's cozy endings that had Eliza falling in love with a cold fish, but melting Higgins. Instead, Eliza's bullish independence prevails in the play's hyper-realistic final scenes; as does Higgins' stubborn refusal to grow beyond or soften his bludgeon-like commentary, equating Eliza with "bilious pigeons" or "a cabbage" or various insects. The less sentimental treatment is worthy of consideration and will be welcome or worrisome, depending on one's sensibilities and attachment to romantic notions.

While familiarity and surprise do battle in this "Pygmalion," the cast is reason three for rapture. Anthony Fusco (Higgins) is as curmudgeonly as expected, but his undercurrent is all youthful swiftness. There's a frothy delight in how he bounds up the wrong side of set designer Annie Smart's marbled railing with curlicues stairway, and there's joust-worthy

vigor in his exacting echoes of various accents – no doubt coached to effervescent perfection by dialect and text coach Lynne Soffer, who deserves her own curtain call.

Irene Lucio's slouching insouciance in opening scenes, where her Eliza sprawls casually on Higgins' leather sofa, perks into heady delight when Pickering addresses her as "Miss Doolittle." It isn't solely a practiced portrayal of a person raised in poverty: it's the equivalent of well-digging, with Lucio smartly plumbing the depths of lower-class vulnerabilities before shooting for the stars with heroic humanity. It's a commanding performance infused with comedic agility that might cause women in the audience to not only admire the actor, but depart the theater determined to be more like her character.

And likability runs rampant through the rest of the cast. L. Peter Callender (Pickering) plays as genteel, but shades his role enough to be believably in collusion with his cohort. (They are, after all, plucking a human being out of her environment, toying with her features, then abandoning her to the winds of fate and society.) A most conscientious Catherine Castellanos (Mrs. Pearce) unearths such nuances of indignation, pride and compassion as Higgins' housekeeper, her too-few moments on stage remain an unforgettable marvel. James Carpenter (Alfred Doolittle) and Sharon Lockwood (Mrs. Higgins) hit the sweet spot of parental nobility – regardless of their respectively dusty and dignified birthrights.

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From left: Anthony Fusco as Henry Higgins, Catherine Castellanos as Mrs. Pearce, and Irene Lucio as Eliza Doolittle in California Shakespeare Theater's production of "Pygmalion," directed by Jonathan Moscone. Photos Kevin Berne

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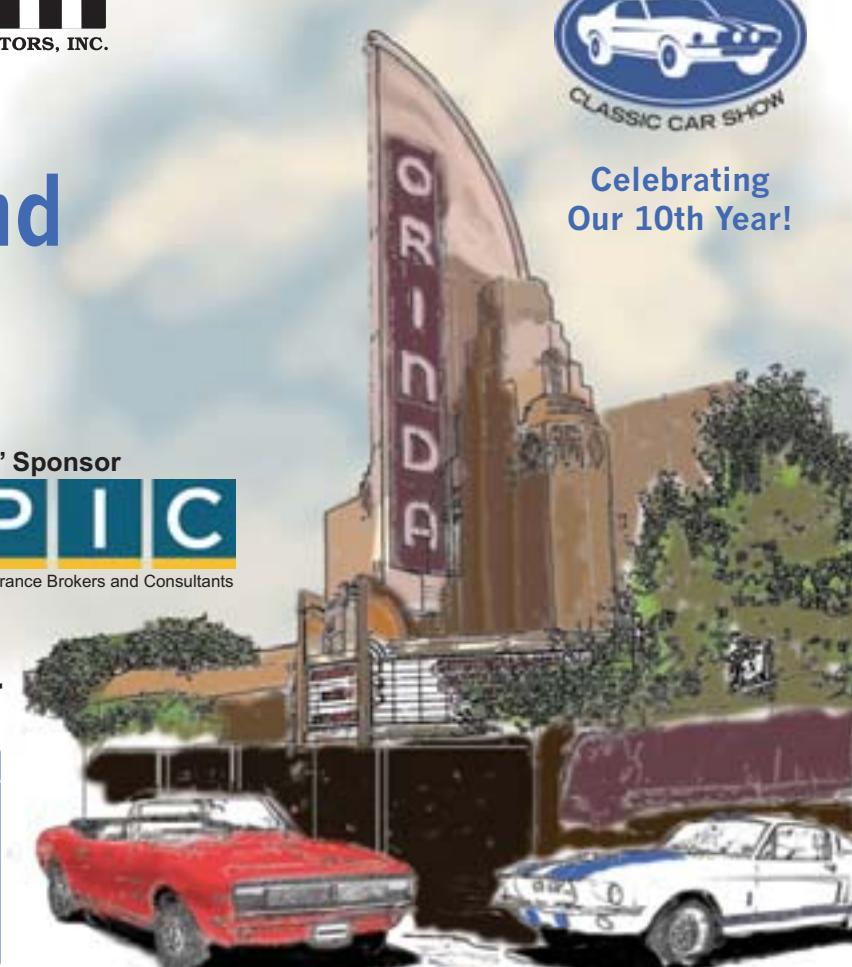
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